Research Proposal of the Thesis entitled

Literary Activism and Identity Formation: Re-instating Tibetan Epistemology in Contemporary Works

Submitted by Vandana Chauhan

Enrollment number: 202306020005

Ph.D. Scholar

Unitedworld School of Liberal Arts and Mass Communication

Under the supervision of

Dr. Shikha Thakur

Associate Professor, Unitedworld School of Liberal Arts and Mass Communication

Karnavati University, Gandhinagar

(December-2024)

Introduction

The Tibetan diaspora refers to Tibetans who have lived in different parts of the world apart from their homeland. This migration began in 1959 after the Chinese invasion of Tibet, leading to political turmoil. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama (spiritual leader), fled to India with other Tibetans in search of refuge. Today, the largest Tibetan population resides in India, followed by Nepal, Bhutan, the United States, Switzerland, France, and Canada.

Tibetans have been based in Dharamshala, where they have established the headquarters for their Government in Exile. Despite enduring displacement, they remain dedicated to their roots and continue to preserve their unique cultural heritage, their language, cuisine, traditional art, and Buddhist teachings. They have established their own educational institutions, schools, and monasteries. Additionally, to preserve their ancient culture and history, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama founded the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in McLeod Ganj in 1961. The Tibetan Youth Congress is also dedicated to spreading awareness about the urgent necessity for a free Tibet. Also, the "March for Tibet" and “Tibetan Freedom Concert” commemorate Tibetans' escape into exile and their longing to return to their roots and seek social justice and human rights against China. Darjeeling has become the Little Lhasa for India and a home away from home for Tibetans. One can visit Darjeeling and catch a glimpse of Tibet. Tibetan cuisine has also attracted a distinct population worldwide, the beverages are explicitly cooked with Yak milk and barley, but we can notice that the traditional Tibetan peripatetic life has exerted the influence of gentrification (Bernstorff and Von Welck, 2003)

The word ‘diaspora’ comes from an ancient Greek word, meaning “to scatter about”. People in exile tend to preserve and celebrate the culture and traditions of their homeland. According to Merriam-Webster, Diaspora refers to a population that shares a common heritage and is scattered in different parts of the world (“Diaspora”). The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines “The movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 421). Diaspora means a movement of people changing their country or place for some intentions. Diaspora literature involves literary texts or compositions where writers through language depict the idea of homeland, a place from where the displacement has occurred, and harsh journeys undertaken on economic compulsions. Tibetans have a history of resistance and activism against the Chinese government's policies, including

protests, advocacy for human rights, and efforts to preserve Tibetan culture and identity. Tibetans face a power disproportion with the Chinese government, which holds significant political and economic power in the region. This power dynamic intensifies the discrimination faced by Tibetans.

Activism refers to the study of the strategies and motivations behind social and political movements. It aims to understand how activism works in these contexts. Here, rather than focusing on social and political activism, I will focus on the literary activism that the Tibetan writers in exile are depicting through their works. Literary activism refers to the use of literature to inspire and express through writing. It helps in changing the perspectives, and voices against the dominating historical narratives, and amplifying the marginalized opinions. The narratives, poems, essays, and memoirs become critical tools for Tibetan diasporic writers to articulate the importance of identity while living in exile, the struggles, and their aspirations to return to their home along with their dream to make their country free. Tibetan writers aim to inform, engage, and mobilize their audience, both within and beyond the diaspora. Therefore, it emphasizes more on creating awareness and educating the readers about the global or local issues related to human rights, freedom, and environmental concerns. Literary activism also promotes the urge to preserve the culture, heritage, and language. The intersection with digital platforms extends the reach of their struggles for example, blogs, e-books, and local magazines help in reaching out to global audiences. Literary works on digital platforms serve as a medium for activism. This research will primarily focus on literary texts but the ongoing protests through writing on digital platforms will be addressed.

Introduction to Authors and Primary Texts

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* (Dhompa 2014) is a memoir of the writer herself. It is the story of Dhompa and her mother, and an account of Dhompa's return back to her homeland in Tibet after her mother dies. This novel explores Dhompa's personal journey, experience, family history, and the challenges faced by Tibetans inside Tibet as well as outside Tibet. Tsering feels the sorrows and offers an exploration of the harsh realities of displacements, conflicts, trauma, identity, hope, and memory. Tsering Namgyal Khortsa's *The Tibetan Suitcase* (Khortsa 2019) is an epistolary novel. The distant entries allow the readers to span generations and locations that

effortlessly depict personal, political, and philosophical aspects along with the concept of Buddhism. Khortsa, through Dawa, the protagonist examines the struggle for his own identity. Initially, he wants to escape from India and when he does, he realizes the importance of his culture and traditional practices of Buddhism at the global level. When Dawa hears Professor Sangpo speak, he feels a sense of pride in his Tibetan identity and roots, "...a swell of aggression rising from within me, a force that I could only call it by its real name of nationalism, a byproduct of nostalgia" (Khortsa 2019). The quotation captures an internal conflict, through literary activism this internal struggle becomes worldwide. Tibetan authors like Khortsa create a potent instrument for advocacy and awareness by bridging personal emotions and the community's common experiences of displacement in their works. The nationalism shown here is a result of love for their homeland, aimed at nonviolent protest for freedom and preservation rather than in a destructive meaning. The novel is a great mixture of spirituality and politics as there is resistance and protests against China.

Tsering Yangzom Lama's *We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies* (Lama 2022) is a novel on expatriation, and how far we'll go to remain connected to our families and our roots. The lives of four people over fifty years are depicted with the essence of their trauma, and suffering as refugees. She follows the lives of a refugee family as they travel and survive in Nepal, Delhi, and Toronto. The resistance against China and how they monopolize their identity is interrogated by Lama. *The Copper Mountain* by Thubten Samphal published in 2021 deals with the environmental issues relevant in contemporary times it delves into the pivotal politics surrounding reincarnation. Centered on Mt. Kailash, a holy mountain, the novel is an icebreaker on Tibetan culture that takes care of its environment and resists assaults by a hungry capitalist authoritarian state. The novel is suitable for the research as it incorporates the elements of social, political, and literary activism while also delving into the theory of eco-criticism and anthropological aspects.

Tsewang Yishey Pemba is known to be the first Tibetan-English author. According to Shelly Bhoil, Pemba had been successful in weaving the ethos and cultural nuances of Tibet. He is considered equal to Raja Rao and Chinua Achebe as Pemba is considered the pioneer of Tibetan writing in English. The historical novel, *White Crane, Lend me Your Wings: A Tibetan Tale of Love and War* (2017) is a historical fiction published posthumously. The novel unfolds the events that led to the Cultural Revolution in Tibet. The themes of nostalgia, identity, isolation, and conflict

of love and war are highlighted through the warrior tribe of Khampas and their experiences. Moreover, the aspects of adapting to modernity while not ignoring their traditional roots. Another work that is chosen for this research is *Noodle Maker of Kalimpong: The Untold Story of My Struggle for Tibet* (2015), which is an auto-biography of Gyalo Thondup, the elder brother of the 14th Dalai Lama. The book explores closely his family's lovely upbringing and the reincarnation of a child to become a leader. According to him, the political turmoil within their nation and insufficient support from nations outside resulted in exile. The struggle of Thondup to save his homeland till the end is depicted in the novel.

Review of Literature

Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora (2003) by Dagmar Bernstorff. This book documents and fills the gap in understanding the experiences of the Tibetan community in India and beyond. It focuses on how Tibetan refugees preserve their culture, and how the community adapts while dreaming of returning to Tibet while facing challenges. The book also includes an interview with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Tibet has a long history of conflicts, building relations, and flourishing its culture and traditions. However, this study will only focus on the events that resulted in Tibetan exile from the 1950s to this date because it's beyond the scope to cover the overall history as the focus only remains on the literary narratives of Tibet, from the happening of cultural revolutions to the present activism (Bernstorff, 2003).

Tibetan public speaker Tenzin Chondon in her podcast “Waking up Closer to Tibet” says Tibetans’ migration and adaptation to the cultures of host countries while also preserving their own identity and spirituality is again an aspect that should be looked into. Tibetans living in India, Europe, Switzerland, and the USA are seen maintaining their identities and traditions in the views of the Dalai Lama. However, they have also adapted to the cultures of foreign lands as the way of dressing, cuisines, and the rituals of getting married have changed a lot. They prefer marrying in a Christian manner, they bargain in vegetable markets as every Indian does, and they dance to Bollywood music at parties and Indian weddings. Tibetans prefer living with their parents but due to Western influence, they live separately after turning 18 (Chondon, 2022. 12:22).

Diaspora by Paul Gilroy emphasizes the importance of both "routes" (the journeys and movements of diasporic communities) and "roots" (the cultural, historical, and familial connections to the homeland). He argues that understanding diaspora requires attention to both of these aspects. Tibetan diaspora literature also delves into the journeys of exile, depicting the challenges faced during migration, as well as the continual efforts to maintain connections to Tibetan roots. The literature might explore how the diaspora community navigates between the routes and roots in their quest for belonging.

Identity Insecurity and the Tibetan Resistance against China by Tsering Topgyal **(**Topgyal 2013 pp. 515-538). This article analyzes the Tibetan struggle against Chinese rule from the 1960s, asking what drives this resistance. It argues that identity insecurity has been the major concern that the Tibetans encounter, and it disagrees with the rules and practices that China Claims are good for Tibet. It acknowledges the extensive loyalty to the Dalai Lama among Tibetans and the constant fears for the survival of Tibetan identity. The article also explores the relationship between Tibet and its diaspora. All these points are developed demonstrating the security rationale behind the Tibetan struggle. Shelly Bhoil, an independent scholar writing on Tibet, her book *Resistant Hybridities: New Narratives of Exile Tibet* (2020) includes essays by Tibetan authors and academicians passionate about Tibetan literature. With an analytical focus, she emphasizes exploring contemporary Tibetan fiction, poetry, music, art, cinema, pamphlets, testimony, and memoirs.

Old Demons, New Deities: Twenty-One Short Stories from Tibet (Dickie 2017) Tenzin Dickie is known for her translation and editing work, bringing Tibetan literature to a broader audience. It is an anthology of contemporary Tibetan short stories that showcase the diversity of voices within the Tibetan diaspora and Tibet itself. The Tibetan Holy Leader Dalai Lama the 14th has also contributed to this field, writing about exile to spirituality and attaining compassion and peace within and outside ourselves is probably the goal. His work *Freedom in Exile* (Lama 1998) is an autobiographical account in which he describes the sequence of events that took place from his childhood to becoming the 14th Dalai Lama of his country. He also shares the experience he faced during the invasion of China. His forced exile and how his people showed faith in him and followed him. He devoted himself to his people and rebuilt the shattered lives in a host city in Dharamshala, currently home to many Tibetans. Although he has written a lot about spirituality,

Buddhism, and compassion, the main focus of the research remains the lives in exile in addition to the political conflicts, oppression, and the hope of returning to their land where they belong. Another notable work is *The Penguin Book of Modern Essays* (Dickie 2023) by Tenzin Dickie is an anthology of modern Tibetan non-fiction. These essays are written by multiple Tibetan writers who are writing in Chinese, English, or Tibetan. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa has written about her mother and how they suffered in exile. There are 28 essays written by 22 Tibetan writers and the themes of these essays are about lost friends, mothers, and surviving in a new nation. There are essays on love letters, food, Dalai Lama, Prince of Tibet. *Echoes from Forgotten Mountain: Tibet in War and Peace* (Norbu 2023) delves into the cultural revolution of Tibet and its resistance against China. The untold stories of soldiers, secret agents, peasants, and beggars. Jamyang Norbu sheds on his past and the struggles of survival being a refugee. This account also helps in exploring the literary activism in Norbu's writing.

Disket Angmo's article *A Brief History of Tibetan Protest and Its Implication of the Nature of Tibetan Independence Movement* (Angmo, pp.3-11) studies the conflict that has been taking place for decades between China and Tibet. Angmo describes why Tibetans are protesting and what exactly the purpose behind it is. The urge to free Tibet and resistance against China's oppression from the 1950s is dealt with. The changes in Tibetans' identity, culture, and language preservation, and how Tibet has evolved over the years are studied. David L. Snellgrove Hugh Richardson discusses in "The Cultural History of Tibet" the overall history from Tibetan kings to the Middle Ages of Tibet. Moreover, the relations of Tibet with Mongolia and China have been discussed in depth.

Keown mentions three main schools of Buddhism in *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Keown 2013). They are, Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana. Mahayana focuses on the original teachings of Buddha, the one who achieved enlightenment, but returns to teach it to humans. Theravada, on the other hand, emphasizes on monastic lifestyle and considers meditation as a way of enlightenment. Vajrayana is specifically being practiced in Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan. This school believes in swift or faster attainment of enlightenment by performing tantras and mantras, these are designed to evoke vitality, longevity, peace of mind, wealth, and success.

A pioneering figure in postcolonial studies, Said's work *Orientalism* (Said 1978) critically examines Western ideologies of the East. He explored how the East was represented as "other" in

Western discourses. Bhabha's work, particularly *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994), introduces the concept of hybridity and the "third space" as a site of cultural negotiation and resistance. He analyses how cultural identities are constructed in colonial encounters. As there are no precise literary theorists of Tibet in the field of diaspora or post-colonialism, therefore these theories will be adopted to examine the primary texts for my research. Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* (Ghosh 2021) and *The Living Mountain* (Ghosh 2022) deal with the disruptive behaviors of human beings that hinder the ecological balance of the jungles and mountains by extracting resources from them. The exploitation done by the outsiders leads to environmental degradation and directly impacts the local communities living there.

The study of diaspora in the case of Tibet is based on diaspora theorists Paul Gilroy, W.E.B. Du Bois, Stuart Hall, Robin Cohen, Avtar Brah, and Néstor García Canclini who have written about diaspora, migration, cultural hybridity and explored issues of identity, belonging, and home in the context of diaspora. The reason behind choosing these theorists is that there are no specific Tibetan diaspora theorists. To gain insights into the idea of home and nation or imagined community in the Tibetan diaspora theorists such as Salman Rushdie and Benedict Anderson will be studied.

Research Gap

The Tibetan diaspora is a unique and complex community with its own set of challenges and experiences. While much research has been conducted on Tibetan diaspora literature, limited scholarly attention has been paid to its role in fostering literary activism. Existing studies often focus on themes of identity, exile, and nostalgia, but the transformative role of literature as a tool for activism and cultural preservation remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how Tibetan diaspora writers use their works to resist cultural erasure, advocate for justice, and engage with global audiences through literary activism.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is

1. To explore the narratives of Tibetan diaspora literature that emphasize displacement, cultural preservation, and resistance.
2. To depict the relation between literature and literary activism, and how it plays a vital role in creating awareness in Tibetan diaspora literature.
3. To examine how Tibetan writers in exile employ literary activism as a means of political and cultural advocacy.
4. To study the literary strategies and themes used to articulate identity, resilience, nostalgia, and the longing for a homeland.
5. To investigate the impact of Tibetan diaspora literature on global awareness through digital platforms that advocate for Tibet's freedom and justice.

Need for the Study

The need of this study is to conduct an in-depth exploration of Tibetan diaspora literature with context to the literary theories of diaspora and literary activism. It will help in analyzing the history and political backdrop of the Tibetan diaspora from the invasion of China and how it gave birth to social and literary activism. Exploring the narrative strategies, storytelling techniques, and literary devices used by Tibetan writers to convey their activism within the texts. This includes examining the use of symbolism, allegory, and metaphors to communicate their messages. The evolution of themes related to literary activism, resistance, and post-colonialism within Tibetan diaspora literature over time, considering how these themes reflect changing geopolitical dynamics and the experiences of successive generations of Tibetan exiles.

Use of an interdisciplinary approach that combines literary analysis, historical research, and diaspora studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of how literature functions as a medium for activism within the Tibetan diaspora. This will also help in offering insights on the usage of literature as a tool for activism and advocacy within diaspora communities, and how these literary texts can inform and influence policymakers and human rights organizations.

Research Methodology

The research methodology should help us to analyze and investigate the distinct aspects of the complex subject. The qualitative approach is most suitable for the literary analysis to explore the

theoretical discourse of diaspora and literary activism. would be employed to study the issues of identity that these writers express in their works. The thematic analysis would help conduct an in-depth study of selected Tibetan diaspora texts. Primary and secondary texts and materials such as articles and other publications along with library archives would also be referred to. Thus, the proposed research will contain the following methods: Thematic analysis and Subjective Analysis Method.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study may have limitations in terms of the number of literary works that can be analyzed. It will focus on a representative sample rather than an exhaustive analysis. Language barriers could be there as the availability of Tibetan diaspora literature in translation may limit the scope of the study, as many texts can be lost in translation. Specific literary works may not be fully generalizable to all Tibetan diaspora literature, as each work is unique in its approach to activism and themes. In addition, not all selected literary works can only feature ecological or activism themes, limiting the depth of eco-critical and activism analysis in some cases. The study may also not cover all relevant dimensions as conducting quantitative literary analysis can be time-consuming. Some books are not available either online or in libraries therefore, access to such literary works can be difficult.

Despite these limitations, the dissertation aims to provide insights into the theories of diaspora, activism, post-colonialism, and eco-criticism within Tibetan diaspora literature which can contribute to a deeper understanding of social, human rights, and environmental issues.

Tentative Chapterization

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature and Literary Activism

Chapter 3: Literary Activism in Selected Texts

Chapter 4: Analysis of Selected Works

Chapter 5: The Dream of Freedom

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Work Cited

Work Cited:

Angmo, Disket. "A Brief History of Tibetan Protest and Its Implication of the Nature of Tibetan Independence Movement." *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2019, pp. 3–11. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26921463. Accessed 2 Feb. 2024.

Bernstorff, Dagmar, and Hubertus Von Welck. *Exile as Challenge.* Orient Blackswan, 2003.

Bhabha, Homi K., 1949-. *The Location of Culture.* London; New York: Routledge, 2004.

Bhoil, Shelly, and Enrique Galvan-Alvarez. *Tibetan Subjectivities on the Global Stage.* Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.

Bhoil, Shelly, editor. *Resistant Hybridities: New Narratives of Exile Tibet*. Lexington Books, 2020.

"Diaspora." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diaspora. Accessed 5 Dec. 2024.

"Diaspora." *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, edited by Wehmeier, Sally, Oxford UP, 2005, p. 421.

Dickie, Tenzin. *Old Demons and New Deities: Contemporary Stories from Tibet*. Navayana, 2017.

Dhompa, Tsering Wangmo. *A Home in Tibet.* Penguin UK, 2014.

Ghosh, Amitav. Toor, Salman. *Jungle Nama*. Fourth Estate India, 2021.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Living Mountain*. Fourth Estate India, 2022.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* Harvard University Press, 1993.

Guru, Gopal, and Sundar Sarukkai. *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social.* Oxford UP, 2019.

Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford Paperbacks, 1996.

Khortsa, Tsering Namgyal. *The Tibetan Suitcase.* Blackneck Books, 2019.

Lama, Dalai. *Freedom in Exile*. Little, Brown Book Group, 1998.

Lama, Tsering Yangzom. *We Measure the Earth With Our Bodies.* McClelland and Stewart, 2022.

Norbu, Namyang. *Echoes From Forgotten Mountain: Tibet in War and Peace.* Vikings, India, 2023.

Pemba, Tsewang Yishey**.** *White Crane, Lend Me Your Wings: A Tibetan Tale of Love and War*. Niyogi Books, 2017.

Rueckert, William. *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.* 1978.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.* Penguin Classics, 2003.

Snellgrove, David L., and Hugh Richardson. *A Cultural History of Tibet.* Shambhala Publications, 1986.

Thondup, Gyalo, and Anne F. Thurston. *The Noodle Maker of Kalimpong: The Untold Story of My Struggle for Tibet*. Random House India, 2016.

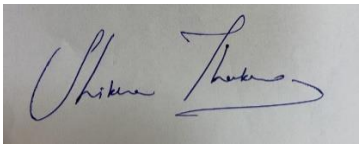
Topgyal, Tsering. *Identity Insecurity and the Tibetan Resistance Against China*. *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 3, 2013, pp. 515–38. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43590713. Accessed 2 Feb. 2024.

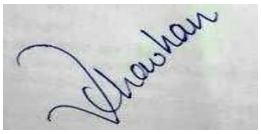
Zimmerman, David. *One Voice.* Kehrer Verlag, 2017.

Podcasts and Videos

"Buddhist Monk Palga Rinpoche's Epic Life: From Monk to Millionaire to Monk." The Ranveer Show, 23 April 2023, www.youtube.com/xxxxx.

Chondon, Tenzin, Public Speaker. “Waking up Closer to Tibet.” episode 1, HT Smart cast Original, Spotify. 22 Feb 2022. 12 Sep 2023.





Dr. Shikha Thakur

(Supervisor)

Vandana Chauhan

(Research Scholar)